

Lucretius On The Development of Language

Post by "Joshua" of October 23, 2019 at 11:20 AM

My thoughts on the question are not organized, but allow me to free-associate for a moment;

What, at minimum, a Theory of Language Needs to Explain;

1. It ought to explain why there is language, rather than no language.
2. It ought to take a position on the original incident of language; was the development centralized in place and time, or distributed throughout and across populations?
3. (Related) it ought to take a position on whether the development of language preceded the migrations out of Africa, or followed them, or some combination of these.
4. It ought to predict whether language, if vanished, would arise again under certain conditions, and what those conditions would be.

Two additional questions that should preoccupy the theorist;

5. Why are there vast differences in (apparently) unrelated language families? Why is such a language inflected and this other language isolating? Why does this language have stress accents, this other language have pitch accents, and this third language is tonal?
6. Also, why did Proto-Indo-European reach such a peak of inflected complexity, while the trend for the last few thousand years has been toward more word isolation? (Ie. English is less inflected than Old French, Old French is less inflected than Medieval Latin and Koine Greek, Medieval Latin and Koine Greek are less inflected than classical Latin and classical Greek, classical Latin and classical Greek are less inflected than Sanskrit, which in turn is less inflected than Proto-Indo-European.)

A materialist theory of language

The early Epicureans couldn't have known that all modern humans are descended from stock that lived in East Africa 100,000 years ago, and didn't colonize the rest of the globe until well into the intervening millennia. But here's what they do seem to believe;

1. That the utility of language is self-evident. Making noises is so useful that nearly every animal larger than a worm indulges the practice. Not just mammals and birds, but reptiles, amphibians, and even fish (using swim bladders) make use of pneumatic vocalizations. Insects rely on mechanical friction for the same effect, rubbing legs together or beating wings. Snakes hiss and sometimes rattle.

2. Language was not endowed by god or Prometheus, or invented by Adam or the First Man, but developed organically. It might have happened once and spread, or it might have happened many times.

3. Because it arose naturally, we can expect that such a thing has happened innumerable times on innumerable worlds, and will happen innumerable times again.

That'll have to be enough for now, but I'll revisit this evening!